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ABSTRACT

Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that adapting part of a novel into a dramatic reading makes students more intimate with the author's intentions and craft; and that a part of a novel may lend itself to various oral interpretations. The main activity of the lesson involves students in producing and presenting readers' theater versions of scenes from the novel. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

The Great Gatsby

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Ken Zelasko, an English teacher and "Trailblazer" at Durango High School in Las Vegas, Nevada.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Adapting part of a novel into a dramatic reading makes students more intimate with the author's intentions and craft.

2. A part of a novel may lend itself to various oral interpretations.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*

PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce or review the technique sometimes called oral interpretation and sometimes called readers' theater. Both of these terms refer to reading nondramatic literature aloud—that is, literature not written in the genre of drama—as if it were drama. The person or persons performing the oral interpretation or readers' theater should read the narration of, say, a novel and the dialogue as well, complete with tag lines such as "he said" and "she exclaimed."

2. Divide students into groups, and assign each group to a scene. Parts of the novel that lend themselves especially well to oral interpretation are the following:

- the dinner party
- Gatsby and Daisy's meeting before he went off to war
- the rendezvous between Daisy and Gatsby at his mansion
- the hotel scene

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3. Before each group sets to work on its scene, go over the following principles of oral interpretation or readers' theater:

- Every scene that you've selected for students to enact has a major climax and some smaller ones. It's the group's first job to figure out which parts of the scene are the high points—and how to emphasize them in a reading.

- The students in each group have to come up with what some experts refer to as a performance concept. That is, the students have to determine how many distinct, individual voices the scene requires—how these voices should blend *and* how these voices should contrast: Should there, for example, be a separate voice for each character in the scene, or will one person read the lines of more than one character? Along the same lines, the students in each group must decide how to handle the narrator: Will just one student read Nick's narration, or will several? Should the narrator always be read by a chorus—that is, voices in unison? How will the group treat the characters' tag lines—let the person reading the character say them? give them to the narrator? give them to someone else? leave them out altogether?

- Once a basic performance concept has been agreed on, the students in each group must actually prepare a script based on the novel—*who* says which words, sentences, and paragraphs and *how* should the lines sound?

- Although an oral interpretation or readers' theater expects the performers to stand or sit rather than move around a stage, as students work out their script, they may want to indicate some slight gestures and even sound effects. For example, in the dinner party scene, we do not hear Daisy and Nick laugh; we only hear Nick report that Daisy and he laugh. Yet the script can call for the sound of a woman's laughter and then a man's as the narrator says the words, "—then she laughed, an absurd, charming little laugh, and I laughed too and came forward into the room."

- Readers are not acting per se, but they must still pay attention to characterization. That is, they should always be aware of a character's major traits and figure out how to communicate those through tone, pacing of speech, pausing, and so on.

- Connection with the audience is important also. Students will be reading from their scripts, but whenever possible, each reader should establish eye contact with some members of the audience. After all, the students, first and foremost, are telling a story, so there should be some signs of intimacy between storytellers and audience.

- An oral interpretation can't just begin. Someone in the group has to introduce it—"set the stage," so to speak.

4. Students in each group will need time to produce one or more versions of its script. Then they will need rehearsal time and space as well.

5. When students in a group are ready, make sure they have the time they need to perform. Consider having members of the audience take notes about each oral interpretation, commenting on some or all of the following points:

- division of script into narrator's parts and characters' parts
- performer's eye contact
- speaking voices: slow enough? loud enough? varied enough?
- particularly strong parts and particularly weak parts of the presentation

Notes will help the audience to give constructive feedback to each group after each performance.

6. If time permits, give groups an opportunity to rework their scripts and perform a second time after taking the audience's comments into consideration.

ADAPTATIONS:

Instead of expecting a full-blown oral presentation or readers' theater, ask individual students to pick a self-contained bit of Nick's narration and to practice reading it with expression. The students must pace themselves, speak clearly, and get into the character of Nick. But in this adaptation, younger students are not being called on to interact with classmates.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Explain how Fitzgerald uses setting to emphasize the differences between the social classes.

2. In the story, Tom and Daisy are a part of the established upper class, while Gatsby is part of the class known as the nouveau riche. Decide which social group you would want to belong to and explain why.

3. Discuss what the following symbols represent in the novel:
a) the valley of ashes
b) the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg
c) the green light at the end of Daisy's dock
d) the mantle clock
e) Daisy's voice "full of money"

4. Compare and contrast the characters of Tom and Gatsby.

5. Debate that *The Great Gatsby* illustrates the theme of the American dream being corrupted by the desire for wealth.

6. Explain how *The Great Gatsby* reflects the Jazz Age.

7. Discuss what led to the downfall of Gatsby's dream.

EVALUATION:

Add your comments to the feedback from the student audience, as explained above.

EXTENSION:

Dearest Daisy
Ask students to compose a letter that Gatsby might have sent to Daisy while he was fighting in World War I. Or ask students to write a letter that Daisy might have written to Gatsby after her wedding to Tom.

Cause of Death

Suggest that students examine the evidence surrounding the deaths of some of the characters in the book. Ask them to write up or orally present a coroner's inquest regarding the deaths of one of the following:

Myrtle Wilson

Gatsby

George Wilson

SUGGESTED READINGS:

F. Scott Fitzgerald on Authorship
Matthew J. Bruccoli (editor), Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1996
Learn about F. Scott Fitzgerald's thoughts and personal and professional life through his letters, notebook entries, articles and reviews he wrote for publication.

F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Princeton Years; Selected Writings, 1914-1920
Chip Deffaa (editor), Fort Bragg, CA, Cypress House Press, 1996
This brief introductory biography of Fitzgerald focuses on his years at Princeton and his writings created for the university's publications, The Tiger and The Nassau Lit. His thoughts and writings from his early life and college years help us understand his future famous writings.

The Beautiful and the Damned
F. Scott Fitzgerald, New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995
The Beautiful and the Damned moodily chronicles the anxieties and dissipations of a rich young couple, Gloria and Anthony Patch, rebellious and hedonistic, who end up desperate and degraded.

WEB LINKS:

F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary Home Page
The University of South Carolina has designed a Fitzgerald site that can assist teachers and students as they investigate Fitzgerald. There is information on Fitzgerald's novels, a biography, plus audio and video clips.
http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/index.html

WNUR-FM Northwestern University Jazz Web
Northwestern University's (Evanston, Illinois) WNUR-FM radio station provides a link between Fitzgerald's novel and the music of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties. This site will prove useful to art, literature, and music teachers.
http://www.nwu.edu/WNUR/jazz/

Flapper Station
This is a great visual site that places The Great Gatsby in context. View antique cars, listen to music, and gaze at the fashions. There are sections on the movies and vintage radio shows.
http://www.sns.com/~rbotti/

The Nineteen-Twenties: A Nation in Flux
This site presents an overview of the 1920s. It includes various essays, events, and a timeline of the 1920s.
http://www2.idsonline.com/jeff/index.html

VOCABULARY:

disillusion
The condition of being disenchanted; disappointed.
Context:
We are caught between hope and disillusion.

mesmerize
To hypnotize, spellbind, fascinate.
Context:
His house was full of wonderful objects and mesmerizing friends.

sardonic
Disdainfully or skeptically humorous; derisively mocking.
Context:
Nick Carraway is sardonic and quiet.

decadent
Characterized by or appealing to self-indulgence; marked by decay or decline.
Context:
The East represents wealth, decadence, and corruption.

pastoral
Of or relating to the countryside, not urban; pleasingly peaceful and innocent.
Context:
The city ends and the pastoral green dream of Gatsby's begins.

rendezvous
A meeting at an appointed place and time.
Context:
Gatsby asks Nick to arrange a rendezvous with Daisy.

distraught
Agitated with doubt or mental conflict.
Context:
His distraught eyes stared down at Daisy.

swindle
To obtain money or property by fraud or deceit.
Context:
I would not give her up to a common swindler who would have to steal a ring to put on her finger.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmarks: Demonstrates an understanding of why certain literary works may be considered classics or works of enduring quality and substance.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: U.S. history

Standard: Understands the changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I.

Benchmarks: Understands how the home front influenced and was influenced by U.S. involvement in World War I (e.g., the impact of public opinion and government policies on constitutional interpretation and civil liberties, U.S. military and economic mobilization for war, wartime contributions of labor and how the war transformed the role and labor of women, and the role of African Americans in the war effort).

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: U.S. history

Standard: Understands how the United States changed between the post-World War I years and the eve of the Great Depression.

Benchmarks:
Understands the rise of popular culture and its impact on American society in the 1920s (e.g., the impact of radio, high circulation print media, and movies; the emergence of distinctive American art, literature, and music; the emergence of artists in the postwar period; how increased leisure time in the 1920s promoted the growth of professional sports, amusement parks, and national parks).

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: music

Standard: Understands the relationship between music and history and culture.

Benchmarks: Knows sources of American music genres (e.g., swing, Broadway musical, blues), the evolution of these genres, and musicians associated with them.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: dance

Standard: Understands dance in various cultures and historical periods.

Benchmarks: Knows the similarities and differences among various contemporary theatrical forms of dance (e.g., jazz, tap).

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
The most widely read American novel of this century, "The Great Gatsby" explores the uniquely American possibilities for remaking oneself. You'll learn how Fitzgerald, through Gatsby, defined for millions the era known as the Jazz Age.

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Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ▶

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
The Great Gatsby

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. When and where does the story of *The Great Gatsby* begin?

2. Who is the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*?

3. What does the Midwest represent in the novel?

4. Who represents the American dream to Myrtle Wilson?

5. Who watches over the valley of ashes?

6. What was the Jazz Age?

7. What were the circumstances of Myrtle Wilson's death?

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The Great Gatsby

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. When and where does the story of *The Great Gatsby* begin?
The story begins in the summer of 1922 on the Long Island shore.

2. Who is the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*?
Nick Carraway, a Midwesterner, relates the story.

3. What does the Midwest represent in the novel?
The Midwest represents innocence where honesty reigns.

4. Who represents the American dream to Myrtle Wilson?
Tom Buchanan, who embodies the wealthy Eastern establishment, represents the American dream to Myrtle Wilson.

5. Who watches over the valley of ashes?
The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg (in the form of an outdoor advertisement) function as the eyes of God. They watch over the boundary where the city stops and the pastoral green dream of Gatsby's begins.

6. What was the Jazz Age?
The Jazz Age occurred in the 1920s and was an era of everlasting merriment. It occurred before the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and World War II.

7. What were the circumstances of Myrtle Wilson's death?
With Daisy behind the wheel of Gatsby's car, Myrtle was struck and killed. It was Gatsby's idea that he would take the blame for the hit-and-run accident.

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